



# Socdem Asia Political Programme

## Promoting Social Democratic Thinking, Alternatives and Practices

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Socdem Asia is a regional grouping of political parties, pre-party formations, think tanks, academics, labour and young activists that works to radically reduce, or even eliminate, inequality and to ensure human dignity for all. With this in mind, we aim to promote the values and practices of social democracy and fight for alternatives to elite politics and neoliberal capitalist economic organization.

### Changing Asia

Asia as a region has consistently been faced with challenges to sustainable development and democracy.

Democracy continues to be an evolving struggle. In Asia, as well as across the world, the state has been used as a machinery of the elite to perpetuate its power and its interests, often at the expense of ordinary workers, rural farmers and fisherfolk, indigenous communities, women, youth and other vulnerable sectors of society. The elite thrive in various forms, such as authoritarian states, politicized military, resisting, or even out-right prohibiting transparency mechanisms that will expose corruption deeply imbedded in institutions of governance, and the stifling of opposition. Even in societies where modern political parties have developed, and civil society has emerged, social tensions remain unresolved, and poverty persists.

Economic development took place in Asia at an unequal rate due to the dictates of neo-liberal, free-market economics. The simultaneous expansion in international trade and growing emphasis on economic liberalization was coupled with cycles of economic instability, social dislocation, and political disenfranchisement across the region. Globalisation was marked by influential international financial institutions (IFIs), in tandem with global powers, more aggressively pursuing a narrow concept of development centered on GDP growth, investment inflows, trade expansion, and fiscal monetary stability, often at the expense of peoples.

Neoliberal policies and instruments that prioritize the profit maxim of private, corporate capital, has all but wiped out industries and agriculture across Asia. It has given rise to the imbalance between management and workers, taking away workers' rights to organize and fight for the benefits that are due them, creating the situation that perpetuates poverty and abuse. Capital consolidated agriculture in certain countries, exacerbating rural poverty. The piece-meal distribution of production across the globe destroyed industrial productivity and has instead left the economy, and the people, at the mercy of low-wage, low-value-added service sector. While capital and goods enjoy free movement across borders,

labor continues to be restricted, and this has opened up a predatory network of transnational crime and trafficking. Capital's wanton destruction of the world's environmental resources, and its high-carbon-emitting processes delivered the one-two punch of global warming and climate change, leaving the peoples of Asia with nothing to protect them from the vagaries of changing global climate.

In these changing times, Socdem Asia finds the responses of liberal democrats and communists alike to be wanting. On the one hand, liberal democracy's insistence on the electoral vote as the means for individuals to change government and one that perpetuates the interests of the elite in the guise of creating law and order to protect individual freedoms does not extend to a transformation of society, nor will it feed the hungry and emancipate the poor. Communism's view of a monolithic state, that must be "smashed" by a workers' revolution, has but given rise to absolutist states where only one party was allowed to mediate between government and society, even to claim for itself the monopoly of truth, thus resulting in a one party dictatorship. The communist model also featured a highly centralized, command economy, which, while it tried to plan and manage the people's need, became a source of privilege and corruption. It even reinforced strong authoritarian modes of relations within the state, the party and civil society, and an almost exclusively collectivist preference to the detriment of individual rights.

It is with these social and political conditions in mind that Socdem Asia established its core principles as democracy and freedom – with an emphasis on popular participation and engagement in the political, social, cultural and economic sphere, equality and social justice – ensuring that each individual is provided equal opportunity to achieve human dignity, where income is fairly distributed, and historic imbalance of power that has been perpetuated by global capital in favor of the private enterprise and the corporation against ordinary people will be reversed , and solidarity – recognizing that human dignity cuts across gender, ethnicity, race, and other socio-political, cultural and even religious affiliations, and sharing the struggle of each individual, or peoples, for empowerment.

## **Our Alternatives**

### ***Human rights and democratization***

Socdem Asia asserts that democracy and socialism can only fully be realized not only by democratizing the state but also by ensuring the existence of an autonomous and vibrant civil society exercising power and constantly engaging the state. This means harmonizing and synergizing our parliamentary and mass movement work while at the same time waging a democratic and just struggle that ensures human dignity for all, and serves as a critique, opposition and alternative to capitalism and to authoritarian rule.

We celebrate the significant human rights advances that have been made in the Asian region, thanks to the relentless work and efforts of hundreds of advocates and activists, as well as the solidarity networks that have been built through long decades of struggle. However, despite these small victories, enormous challenges still remain.

In Burma for instance, reform efforts have finally born fruit with the formal end of military rule in 2011. In August of that same year, the government also began relaxing its control of media by abolishing pre-publication censorship, though restrictive guidelines for journalists remain in place. In fact, in its 2013 World Report, Human Rights Watch insisted that, “media freedoms improved in 2012 but remain highly restricted,” due to the continuing existence of at least “16 guidelines restricting publication of articles critical of the government.”

In Indonesia, impunity remains a concern, especially since no major human rights violators during Suharto’s New Order has ever faced justice. This is aggravated by the government’s poor prosecution record and the lack of civilian jurisdiction over military personnel who commit serious human rights violations.

Meanwhile, Malaysian human rights advocates scored a major victory two years ago in 2011 when the government of Prime Minister Najib finally rescinded the Banishment Act 1959, the Restricted Residence Act of 1933, and the Emergency (Public Order and Crime Prevention) Ordinance 1969—three laws that have been repeatedly used in the past curtail civil liberties and to hold criminal suspects indefinitely without charge or trial.

In the Philippines, the free expression of opinion on cyberspace was threatened when the Cybercrime Prevention Act was enacted into law in 2012, which increases the penalty for computer-related libel with imprisonment from six months to six years. Its implementation, however, was eventually suspended after the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order on October 9, 2012. The Philippines also made headway in ensuring justice for victims of human rights violation during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos through the passage of the Compensation Act for Human Rights Victims in 2013. While the law created a Human Rights Compensation Board that is tasked to document the various levels of human rights violation through accounts of victims and their families and ensure remuneration to the victims and their kin, the work will not be completed in time for the initial deadline the law set for November 2014. It is thus of paramount importance to ensure the extension of the deadline to May 2015, as well as ensure the proper documentation of all martial law atrocities and its proper integration into the public education curriculum to make sure that the nation, especially the succeeding generations, will never forget.

Socdem Asia is a platform to effectively coordinate political actions to address human rights violations, in whatever forms they may be. Especially as global neoliberalism created new threats to the social, economic and cultural rights of the people, no less than a regional response anchored on international solidarity is needed to promote and secure human rights in Asia. We believe in the rights-based approach to development and poverty eradication, we promote the people’s economic and social rights along with the gender equality and the empowerment of unions.

We believe that all these political struggles must be coupled with the exercise of universal suffrage and the strengthening of political parties. The right to universal suffrage is a modernizing weapon of the poor against the machinations of the elite and the political class to keep the ordinary citizens at the fringes of governance. In the same manner, political parties must be grounded in the people’s

advocacies as they take the parliamentary road to advance and deepen democracy and realize socialism. After all, what we can accomplish by transforming the state is based on the condition that we are ready to defend our right to representation and push our demands in the streets.

In cases of the elite's deliberate withholding of democratic options, we are prepared to defend our democracy and our political and civil rights through the revolutionary path pointed to us by our predecessors. And for so long as democratic paths remain wide open for our utilization, we make use of them to advance our struggle for equality, justice, and freedom.

### **Sustainable Development**

Socdem Asia goes one step further in recognizing that economic development that improves the lives of ordinary people must also recognize the social responsibility of present generations to future generations; that development isn't progress unless it is found upon an intergenerational pact that ensures mankind's constant but tempered access to resources. We oppose the relentless, shortsighted pursuit of economic growth founded on extractive economic practices that undermine the carrying and regenerative capacity of nature.

Socdem Asia commits to sustainable development – the efficient and ethical optimization of natural resources and human potentials, anchored by a comprehensive understanding of progress, which strikes a balance between the socio-economic, political, and environmental dimensions of development.

We assert that markets must be reintegrated into society, they must not be the ultimate arbiter of social and political interaction, but must instead be only one of the mechanisms for ensuring the satisfaction of individuals' multifaceted basic needs. Beyond material self-satisfaction, we work together to ensure a cohesive respond to human needs ranging from the search for solace within a social setting, to a sense of political belonging within a community, to individuals attachment to a set of principles and values that define life and its meaningfulness, and a symbiotic co-existence with nature.

We promote sustainable development that underlines the necessity to reverse past mistakes by shifting our energies and resources to protecting our biodiversity and mitigate the impact of climate change, harnessing our political institutions to ensure resilience, representation, and accountability among communities, and improve the social foundations of economic growth by investing in health, education, and welfare of the citizens, especially those most vulnerable to the worsening climate. Especially at this critical juncture in human history, ensuring sustainable development means working as a coordinated block of political parties and social movements to elicit commitments from governments to ensure the shift to environmentally-congenial technologies for power generation and food production, and securing the necessary support to ensure the resilience of communities most vulnerable to the vagaries of climate change.

## **Social state and the universal social protection**

Socdem Asia believes that a life with dignity is also achieved by combining poverty reduction and eradication programs with universal coverage of social protection. Social protection guarantees relief from deprivation, and enhances real incomes and capabilities, it is also transformative as it addresses equity, empowerment, and social and economic rights.

We promote transformative social protection that challenges the limited ambition of social protection policy in practice from being “social safety nets” and one that aims to provide “economic protection” against livelihood shocks to one that can be affordable and universal, and readily available for citizens at any and all times of their need.

We fight for a social state that provides a broad spectrum of basic social services including health, education, clean water, humane housing and electricity, education, adequate and affordable food for all, and living pension and assistance to the vulnerable groups (i.e. elderly, disabled, peasants, unemployed). To achieve this, democratic socialists must fight for a bigger slice of the fiscal pie and ensure that it is spent to augment social spending on important welfare services and programs. We must persuade our governments to spend more rather than stay loyal to the mantra of under-spending to “balance the budget” and curb the deficit. Deficit spending is not necessarily bad so as long as spending is strategic and has high social and economic value, especially as, according to ILO, such a program could cost less than 4-5 percent of national GDP.

We believe that individual states must be committed to achieve full employment and which is firmly committed to purging commodification. Socdem Asia also engages the state to undertake labor-intensive infrastructure projects, which in turn will create jobs needed by workers in the immediate.

We also believe that governments must introduce ambulatory relief programs to the poor such as conditional cash transfers sourced from a stimulus fund, which in turn is sourced from domestic borrowings instead of siphoning it from external sources such as the ADB and the World Bank.

Lastly, democratic socialists commit to engage our respective governments to make concrete steps in shifting away from export-led growth toward a more inward looking economic growth policy, which requires sufficient income and asset redistribution to ensure the growth of internal markets.

## **People centered Regional Integration**

Socdem Asia believes that there is a great need for effective implementation and coordination of ASEAN’s work. Broader management, climate change, food security issues, poverty eradication, protection of workers right and right to work as well as migrant workers issues, gender equality, and

security, and other social and political issues must be addressed in the regional level. Civil society organizations in the region already have a concept and developed understanding of alternative regionalism based on common and universal values; solidarity against injustices, lack of security and exploitation brought about by the continuing mal-development and climate-frying thrusts of the economic community building.

We are disappointed that the notion of regionalism is now narrowed to economic terms while the concerns of people are much broader than economic. We support the many groups that are slowly taking regional work seriously and are now intervening through their focus issues. A combination of human rights, economic, social, gender and climate justice perspectives are important handles to take in the myriad issues.

### **Decent Work, Decent Life**

Socdem Asia also endeavors to empower the working people by restoring the balance between management and labor, reversing “labor flexibilization,” or the systematic erosion of labour rights for purely profit-driven and productivity based considerations through sub-contractual work, and protecting the rights of migrant workers through the promotion of decent work.

Socdem Asia places paramount importance on work anchored by safe and enabling working conditions, protection of labour rights, vibrant labour unions, and the availability of meaningful employment opportunities for the greater majority of the population.

We believe that decent work is central to human dignity and the cornerstone of any democratic society; it should stand at the forefront of much-needed economic reforms to reverse the tragic decline of labour rights, public welfare, and social cohesion in recent decades. The International Labour Organization has succinctly captured the true essence of decent employment by defining work as “a source of personal dignity, family stability, peace in the community, democracies that deliver for people and economic growth that expands opportunities for productive jobs and enterprise development.” The ILO’s Decent Work Agenda rests on four pillars: namely, job creation, guaranteeing of employment rights, expansion of social protection, and promotion of social dialogue, and this is precisely the commitment that Socdem Asia makes.

### **Moving Forward**

Socdem Asia takes on the challenge of the times by bringing forth social democratic alternatives to economic development and political participation. We have had enough of neoliberal economic policies that have left the people powerless against private enterprises, global capital, and climate change. We recognize that the real empowerment of the ordinary people lies in a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and multi-dimensional approach to local and regional development. As political parties, governments, and social movements promoting human rights and democratization, sustainable development,

universal social protection, people-centered regional integration, and decent work, we strive to bring back ordinary people to the center of political and economic life, in turn achieving human dignity for all.